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## Paving the path for Medical Commissioning Programs at Naval Hospital Bremerton

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"If I can do it, then so can you" was part of the message shared by Lt. Cmdr. Carmelo Ayala, Naval Hospital Bremerton's Internal Medicine Department division officer as he helped explain the process of applying to become a Navy Nurse Corps officer by using the Medical Enlisted Commissioning Program during NHB's Medical Commissioning Program Symposium held on Jan. 29, 2014.

(Photo by Douglas H Stutz)

Take it from an undesignated Seaman who is now a Navy Nurse Corps officer; nursing school is not easy.

But if a person is dedicated and determined, they can make the grades to make the grade and follow a career path similar to that of Lt. Cmdr. Carmelo Ayala, who started out part of Deck department on fleet oiler USS Cimarron (AO-177) and is now Naval Hospital Bremerton's (NHB) Internal Medicine Department division officer. "There's no room for procrastinate if you get selected and make it to the college of your choice to study medicine," said Ayala, who shared his personal experience and professional knowledge becoming a Navy Nurse during NHB's Medical Commissioning Programs Symposium held Jan. 29, 2014.

The symposium provided extensive information on the Navy's many officer commissioning opportunities in medical health science fields.

Along with Ayala, other subject matter experts provided presentations on the Seaman to Admiral (STA-21) program, Medical Enlisted Commissioning Program (MECP) for Nursing, as well as opportunities and information on other scholarship programs including medical school commissioning pathway(s) via scholarship from the Uniformed Services University for the Health Sciences (USUHS), the Health Professionals Scholarship Program (HPSP), and the Medical Services Corps Inservice Procurement Program (MSC-IPP) with an emphasis on physician's assistant and health care administration track, and dental school commissioning pathway.

"The number one question asked in our command career counselor office is on some type of commission program. This symposium provides our Sailors with a perfect opportunity to learn about a number of ways to start the



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process," said Naval Hospital Bremerton Command Master Chief Douglas George.

Ayala was subject matter expert for MECP, an in-service procurement path that gives qualified enlisted men and women a chance to earn an entry level degree in nursing and be appointed as an ensign. Part of the checklist for applying for the program is a minimum of 30 semester hours (or 45 quarter hours) of undergraduate courses needed to be accepted for transfer towards a Bachelor of Science of Nursing by the institution a person is applying.

"One of the common characteristics of MECP selectees is that they are academically sound. They have a strong academic track record, especially in science. They took tough courses and made good grades in those subjects. Each of them distinguished themselves by such traits as being leading petty officers, and marked as early promote on their fitness evaluation (FITREP)," Ayala said, noting that selectees should strive to be 'well-rounded' applicants and career-oriented, going through the motions in order to get a degree or commission. The checklist for MECP calls for having a commanding officer's endorsement and/or recommendation, along with ACT or SAT scores completed within three years; copies of college transcripts; copies of the least five years of observed evaluations or FITREPs; three interviewer appraisal sheets; and a personal statement.

"The selection board looks for a personal statement that says 'wow!' They want to see that a commanding officer and the interviewers were obviously compelled to take the time to hand-write or type comments not routinely seen on other packages such as, 'I trust this man with my family,' or 'candidate Seaman Jones possesses every trait of a naval officer."

Other distinguishing features of submission packages shared by Ayala were that they were administratively neat, concise, conservative in preparation – no card stock or heavy weight paper – and the content has to be accurate and easy to follow. There can be no grammatical or punctuation errors and no misspelled words.

"The personal statement has to be clearly articulated. The applicant has to demonstrate their understanding of their future roles as a Navy nurse in addition to becoming a Navy officer," Ayala said.

Selection boards also look for proven track records of candidates taking on leadership opportunities. They want to see if a person has demonstrated leadership by taking on increased responsibility and challenges.

"If there is a candidate who is applying from a shipboard command but doesn't have a warfare pin, then that's going to have me wonder why they don't. It's not going to look good for them," Ayala said.

Ayala stressed that a candidate's package must leave no doubt that the applicant has a nursing career in mind and that the experts in their chosen program strongly support the applicant. "We don't want any package to be a head-scratcher for the board. These are packages that make board members wonder 'what happened?' or 'why is this item missing?" said Ayala, citing that a submitted package missing personal readiness test (PRT) results and/or a previously failed PRT with no apparent explanation are non-starters. Other examples mentioned were service record discrepancies left uncorrected for several years or no warfare designation when the opportunity existed to earn one.

Lt. Sheila Phillips of NHB's Ambulatory Procedure division and Post Anesthesia Care Unit and a Navy Nurse, also shared selection board tips. She stressed to all those interested that if they're going to apply, then they simply need to put the time and effort into it and make sure they comply with all requirements, from college level classes to Navy fitness evaluations.

"What are board members looking for? They look at everything. They want to see if someone applying has taken college classes that are applicable like anatomy, physiology, microbiology, chemistry. Not fluff classes," said Phillips, sharing the example that if a person is applying for the Navy Nurse Corps, the board also is looking for acceptance letters from both the college and the Department of Nursing of that same college.

Other such items needed for a submission packet include letters of recommendations, test scores from ACTs or SATs within three years; college course grade point average; Navy FITREPs in chronological order, and even an essay/personal statement explaining why a Sailor wants to become, for example, a Navy Nurse.

"I tell people to speak from their heart. Don't put down what you think they might want to hear. Be honest. It's also a good idea to have someone else proofread the essay to ensure there are no errors at all. Same for Navy FITREPs. Make sure they are all accurate and in order, the commissioning board is going to consist of six or seven senior Navy Nurse Corps officers and one line officer. They are looking for their replacement. They want someone who is well rounded and has shown already to have gone above and beyond on their current duty, helping in the community and by advancing their education," Phillips said.

The emphasis on academic performance, leadership potential, and involvement with collateral duties for every commissioning path chosen was also stressed by Cmdr. David Thomas, NHB Medical Services deputy director and symposium facilitator.

"We want our Sailors who are applying for a commissioning program to show how they've been inspired and how they can contribute to the corps," said Thomas, sharing that for those who are at shore-based commands like NHB,

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this is the perfect opportunity to enroll in college classes and eliminate as many if not all the science-related courses as they can, especially those that have labs as part of the curriculum.

"Start today. For example, there are 30 credit hours needed to apply for Navy Nurse Corps. Science-related classes with labs are not generally available on a ship or when deployed overseas. Now is the time to get those required classes out of the way. It's also a good idea to carefully consider adding too many classes to the current hectic work/life balance that we all have. If a person overloads with number of classes at once and then doesn't get good grades, that's just not good planning," Thomas said.

Although most of the enlisted staff members attending the symposium were primarily hospital corpsmen, there were personnel with other rating specialties in attendance such as Yeoman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Ashli Defraties of NHB's Human Resources department.

"My goal is to become a nurse in the Navy. This symposium was very well taught with a lot of great information shared. I especially liked the MECP part because that is the program I'm now interested in applying. I've started already at Olympic Community College. I plan on getting as many of the pre-requisites in math and science out of the way as I can, so when I apply I can be ready to go that same day if possible!" exclaimed Defraties, a Texas native.

For Defraties or anyone else seeking information on a particular commissioning programs or getting ready to actually apply for one, Thomas, Ayala, Phillips are available to help with the process. One grade at a time to get the process right.



About vjohnson